

FRUSTRATE

BY MARY AUSTIN

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I KNOW that I am a disappointed woman and that nobody cares at all about it, not even Henry; and if anybody thought of it, it would only be to think it ridiculous. It is ridiculous, too, with my waist, and not knowing how to do my hair or anything. I look at Henry sometimes of evenings, when he has his feet on the fender, and wonder if he has the least idea how disappointed I am. I even have days of wondering if Henry is n't disappointed, too. He might be disappointed in himself, which would be even more dreadful; but I don't suppose we shall ever find out about each other. It is part of my disappointment that Henry has never seemed to want to find out.

There are people who think it is somehow discreditable to be disappointed; and whatever comes, you must pretend to like it, and just keep on pretending. I don't know why. It must be that some things are right in life and some others are not, and unless somebody has the courage to speak up about it, I don't know how we are ever to find it out. I don't see, if nobody else is hurt by it, why we should n't have what we like out of life; and if there 's a way of getting or not getting it, people have a right to know. Sometimes I think if I 'd known a little more, just a very little . . . !

It all began, I suppose, in the kind of people I was brought up among. They 'd none of them had the kind of things I wanted, so of course they could n't tell me anything about the way to get them. There was my mother. She had to work hard, and had never been anywhere but to a Methodist conference and once to the capital when father was a delegate or something, and her black silk had been turned twice; but she did n't seem the least disappointed. I think it must have

been the way things were between her and my father. Father died when I was sixteen, so I could n't tell much about it, but I know mother never so much as thought of marrying again. She was like a person who has had a full meal, but I—I am just kind of hungry . . . *always*. My mother never talked to me about her relations to my father. Mothers did n't; it was n't thought suitable. I think sometimes, if she had, it might have made a difference about my marrying Henry.

The trouble was in the beginning, that though I knew the world was all full of exciting, interesting things, I thought they came to you just by living. I had no idea there was a particular way you had to go to work to get them. I think my people were n't the kind to make very nice discriminations about experiences or anything. They would n't have thought one way of being in love, for instance, was much better or different from another. They had everything sort of ticketed off and done with; such as that all church-members were happier than unbelievers, and all men naturally more competent and intelligent than their women. They must have known, some of them, that things did n't always work out that way; but they never let on about it—anyway, not to us young people. And if married couples were n't happy together, it was n't considered decent to speak of it.

I suppose that was what got me to thinking that all the deep and high and shining things that I had a kind of instinct went with being married, belonged to it naturally, and, when you had found a suitable man, came along in their proper place without much thinking. And that was about all I knew when Henry proposed to me at the Odd Fellows' Festival. We were both on the

decoration committee, and drove out to the old Lawson place that afternoon for roses. I remember the feel of them against my cheek, hot and sweet, and the smell of the syringa, and a great gold-and-black butterfly that fled and flitted down the green country road, mottled black and gold with shadows. Things like that gave me a strange kind of excitement, and yet a kind of lonesomeness, too, so I did n't mind Henry holding my hand between us in the buggy. I thought he must be feeling something of the same sort, and it did n't seem friendly to take my hand away. But I did take it away a moment later when he proposed. It turned me kind of cold. Of course I meant to accept him after a while. I liked him, and he was what my folks called suitable; but I seemed to want a little time to think about it.

Henry did n't want me to think. He kept hinting, and that evening under the grape-arbor at the minister's, where we had gone to get the sewing society's ice-cream freezer, he kissed me. I'd heard about engaged kisses, but this was n't anything but just a kiss—like when you have been playing drop the handkerchief. I'd always had a feeling that when you had an engaged kiss something beautiful happened. There were times afterward when it almost seemed about to, and I would want to be kissed again to see if the next time . . . Henry said he was glad I had turned out to have an affectionate disposition.

My family thought I was doing well to marry Henry. He had no bad habits, and his people were well-to-do; and then I was n't particularly pretty or rich or anything. I had never been very popular with young men; I was too eager. Not for them, you understand; but just living and doing things seemed to me such a good game. I suppose it is difficult for some folks to understand how you can be excited by the way a shadow falls, or a bird singing on a wet bough; and somehow young men seemed to get the idea that the excitement had something to do with them. It made them feel as if something was expected of them; and you know how it is with young men: they sort of pull back from the thing that is expected of them just because it is expected. I always thought it rather small, but I suppose they can't help it. There was a woman I met at Fairshore who explained

how that was; but I did n't know it then, and I was rather sensitive about it. Anyway, it came about that I had n't many beaux, and my mother was a good deal relieved when I settled down to Henry. And we had n't any more than got the furniture as we wanted it when I discovered that there had n't anything happened at all! Instead of living with my mother, I was just living with Henry; I've never done anything else.

There are things nobody ever tells young girls about marriage. Sometimes I think it is because, if they knew how to estimate their experience in the beginning, there is such a lot they would n't go on with; and when I was married, nobody ever thought of anything but that you had to go on with it. There were times when it seemed as if all it needed was just going on: there was a dizzying point just about to be reached from which Henry and I should really set out for somewhere.

It took me fifteen years to realize that we had n't set out for anything, and would never get anywhere in particular.

I know I tried. Times I would explain to Henry what I wanted until he seemed to want it as much as I did; and then we would begin whatever we had to do,—at least I would begin,—and then I would find out that Henry had forgotten what we were doing it for—like the time we saved to set out the south lot in apricots, and Henry bought water-shares with the money. He said it would be cheaper to own the water for the apricots; but then we had n't anything left to pay for the planting, and the man who had sold Henry the shares turned out not to own them. After a while I gave up saving.

The trouble was, Henry said, I was too kind of simple. It always seemed to me, if you wanted things, you picked out the one nearest to you, and made a mark so you could keep tab on whether you were getting it or not; and then you picked out the next nearest, and went for that, and after a while you had all of them. But Henry said when it came to business it was a good deal more complicated, and you had to look on all sides of a thing. Henry was strong on looking on all sides; anybody that had any kind of reasonableness could always get over him, like that man with the water-shares. That was when I was trying to make myself believe that if

we could get a little money together, we might be in things. I had been reading the magazines, and I knew that there were big, live things with feelers out all over creation, and if I could just get the least little tip of one. . . . But I knew it was n't money. When I was n't too sick and over-worked and worn out trying to keep track of Henry's reasons, I knew that the thing I was aching for was close beside me . . . when I heard the wind walk on the roof at night, . . . or heard music playing . . . and I would be irritated with Henry because he could n't help me lay hold of it. It is ridiculous, I know, but there were times when it seemed to me if Henry had been fatter, it would have helped some. I don't mean to say that I had wanted to marry a fat man, but Henry had n't filled out any, not like it seems men ought to: he just got dry and thinner. It used to make me kind of exasperated. Henry was always patient with me; he thought it was because I had n't any children. He would have liked children. So would I when I thought I was to have one, but I was doing my own housework, and I was never strong. I cried about it a good deal at the time; but I don't suppose I really wanted it very much or I would have adopted one. I will tell you—there are women that want children just for the sake of having them, but the most of them want them because there is a man— And the man they want gets to hear of it, and whenever a woman is any way unhappy, they think all she needs is a baby. But there 's something else ought to happen first, and I never gave up thinking it was going to happen; all the time I kept looking out, like Sister Anne in the fairy-tale, and it seemed to me a great many times I saw dust moving. I never understood why we could n't do things right here at home—big things. There were those people I 'd read about in Germany—just plain carpenters and butchers and their wives—giving passion-plays. They did n't know anything about plays; they just felt grateful, and they did something like they felt. I spoke to the minister's wife about it once—not about a passion-play, of course, that would n't have done; but about our just taking hold of something as if we thought we were as good as those Germans,—but she did n't seem to think we could. She kind of pursed up her mouth and said,

"Well, we must remember that they had the advantage of having lived abroad." It was always like that. You had to have lived somewhere or been taught or had things different; you could n't just start right off from where you were. It was all of a piece with Henry's notion of business; there was always some kind of queer mixed-up-ness about it that I could n't understand. But still I did n't give up thinking that somehow I was going to pull the right string at last, and then things would begin to happen. Not knowing what it was I wanted to happen, I could n't be expected to realize that it could n't happen now on account of my being married to Henry. It was at Fairshore that I found out.

It was when we had been married eighteen years that Aunt Lucy died and left me all her property. It was n't very much, but it was more than Henry would ever have, and I just made up my mind that I was going to have the good of it. Henry did n't make any objection, and the first thing I did was to go down to Fairshore for the summer. I chose Fairshore because I had heard about all the authors and painters being there. You see, when you never have any real life except what you get from reading, you have a kind of feeling that writers are the only real *own* folks you 've got. You even get to thinking sometimes that maybe, if you had known how to go about it, you could have written yourself, though perhaps you 'd feel that way about bridge-building or soldiering, if it was the only real kind of work you saw much of. Not that I ever thought I could write; but I had so many ideas that were exactly like what I 'd read that I thought if I could only just get somebody to write them for me— But you can't; they 've all got things of their own. Still, you would think the way they get inside the people they write about that they would be able to see what is going on inside of you, and be a little kind.

You see, it had come over me that away deep inside of me there was a really beautiful kind of life, singing, and burning blue and red and gold as it sang, and there were days when I could n't bear to think of it wasting there and nobody to know.

Not that Henry did n't take an interest in me,—his kind of interest,—if I was sick or hurt, or seeing that I had a comfortable

chair. But if I should say to Henry to lean upon my heart and listen to the singing there, he would have sent for the doctor. Nobody talks like that here in Castroville: only in books I thought I had heard the people calling to one another quietly and apart over all the world, like birds waking in a wood. I've wondered since I came back from Fairshore if people put things in books because they would like to have them that way.

It is difficult to tell what happened to me at Fairshore. It did n't really happen—just the truth of things coming over me in a slow, acrid dribble. Sometimes in the night I can feel the recollection of it all awash at the bottom of my heart, cold and stale. But nothing happened. Nobody took any notice of me but one woman. She was about my age, plain-looking and rather sad. I'd be proud to mention her name; but I've talked about her a great deal, and, with all my being so disappointed, it is n't so bad but it might be worse if everybody got to find out about it. She was really a much greater writer than the rest of them; but, I am ashamed to say it, just at first, perhaps because she was so little different from me on the outside, and perhaps just because she was a woman, I did n't seem to care much about her. I don't know why I should n't say it, but I did want to have something to do with interesting men. People seem to think that when a woman is married she has got all that's coming to her; but we're not very different from men, and *they* have to have things. There are days sometimes when it seems to me that never to have known any kind of men but Henry and the minister and old man Truett, who does our milking, would be more than I could bear. I thought if I could get to know a man who was big enough so I could n't walk all around him, so to speak,—somebody that I could reach and reach and not find the end of,—I should n't feel so—so frustrated. There was a man there who wrote things that made you feel like that,—as if you could take hands with him and go out and rescue shipwrecked men and head rebellions. And when I tried to talk to him, I found him looking at me the way young men used to before I married Henry—as if he thought I wanted something, and it was rather clever of him not to give it to me.

It was after that that I took to sitting with the writer woman. I'd noticed that though the men seemed to respect her, and you saw them in corners sometimes reading manuscripts to her, they never took her to walk, or to see the moon rise, or the boats come in. They spent all that on the pretty women, young and kind of empty-headed. I'd heard them talk when they thought I was n't listening. And the writer woman sat about with the other women, and did n't seem to mind it.

I hoped when people saw me with her, they'd think it was because she was so famous, and not guess how terrible it was to find yourself all at once a middle-aged woman sitting on a bench, and all the world going by as if it was just what they expected. It came over me that here were all the things I had dreamed about,—the great sea roaring landward, music, quick and gay; looks, little incidents,—and I was n't in it; I was n't in it at all.

I suppose the writer woman must have seen how it was with me, but I thought at first she was talking of herself.

"It's all very wonderful out there, is n't it?" she said, looking toward the blue water and the beach shining like a shell, with the other writers and painters walking up and down and making it into world stuff. "Very wonderful—when you have the price to pay for it!"

"It is expensive." I was thinking of the hotel, but I saw in a minute she meant something else.

"The price you pay," she said, "it is n't being fit to be in the Great World or being able to appreciate it when you're in; it is what you contribute to keep other people in, I suppose."

I must have said something about not being able to see what the kind of women who were in contributed—just girls and flirty kind of married women.

"It's a kind of game, keeping other people in," said the writer woman. "They don't know much else, but they know the game. We are, most of us," she said, "like those matches that will not light unless they are struck upon the box: there is a particular sort of person that sets us off. It's a business, being that sort of person."

"If anybody could only learn it—" I tried to seem only polite.

"It is the whole art," she said, "of putting yourself into your appearance." She

laughed. "I have too much waist for that sort of thing. I have my own game."

I seemed suddenly to want to get away to my room and think about it. I know it is absurd at my age, but I lay on the bed and cried as I had n't since they told me my baby had n't lived. For I knew now that all that beautiful life inside me could n't be born either, for I was one who had to have help to be worth anything to myself, and I did n't know the game. I had never known it.

All the time I had been thinking that all I needed was to find the right person; and now I understood that, so far as anybody could guess, I was n't the right person myself. I had n't the art of putting myself into my appearance. I 'm shy about talk, and my arms are too fat, and my skirts have a way of hanging short in front.

I 've thought about it a great deal since. It does n't seem fair. Nobody told me about it when I was a girl; I think nobody tells girls. They just have to sort of find it out; and if they don't, nobody cares. All they did tell me was about being good, and you will be happy; but it is n't so.

There is a great deal more to it than that, and it seems as if people ought to know. I think we are mostly like that in Castroville: we 've got powers and capacities 'way down in us, but we don't know anything about getting them out. We think it is living when we have got upholstered furniture and a top buggy. I know people who think it is worth while never to have lived in a house without a cupola. But all the time we are not in the game. We do not even know there is a game.

Sometimes I think, if it would do me any good, I could turn in and learn it now. I watched them at Fairshore, and it seemed to me it could be learned. I have wild thoughts sometimes,—such thoughts as men have when they go out and snatch things,—but it would n't do me any good. Henry's folks were always long-lived, and there are days when I am so down that I am glad to have even Henry. As long as people see us going about together they can't know— I 'm rather looking forward to getting old now. I think perhaps I sha'n't ache so. But I *should* like to know how much Henry understands.